

## Historical pageants, neo-romanticism, and the city in interwar Britain

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Tom Hulme, 'Historical Pageants, Neo-Romanticism, and the City in Interwar Britain', *Informationen zur modernen Stadtgeschichte (IMS)* (forthcoming, 2017).

In the early years of the twentieth century a new form of theatre, quickly dubbed the “historical pageant”, burst onto the scene in Britain.<sup>1</sup> Its defining characteristic was the theatrical re-enactment of a selection of episodes from local history by casts of hundreds, and often thousands, of local people. For at least fifty years audiences regularly packed themselves into specially-made grandstands in parks, fields, ruined abbeys, and castle grounds to witness these celebrations of the local and national past. All sections of society, from Royals to labourers, were susceptible to what the press termed “pageantitis” – an affliction that seemingly caused an uncontrollable urge to dress-up and perform the past.<sup>2</sup> A conservative estimate would suggest that altogether hundreds of thousands of people performed in a pageant, with several millions seeing at least one staging; the 1911 Pageant of Empire alone, for example, was seen by over one million people.<sup>3</sup> This startlingly popular movement began as a small-town phenomenon in the rural county of Dorset in south-west England – though it had antecedents both in England and abroad.<sup>4</sup> Over a period of five days in June 1905, around 30,000 people saw one of seven performances staged to commemorate the 1200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the town of Sherborne (population c. 6000). It was Louis Napoleon Parker, a theatre producer, composer, and former Sherborne music-teacher, who ‘invented’ the pageant.<sup>5</sup> Parker was a charismatic showman, and quickly carved out a niche selling his vision of pageantry to other towns in Britain – such as Warwick, Dover, and Colchester. His creation was also emulated or adapted before the First World War by other

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<sup>1</sup> My thanks go to Katie Palmer Heathman and Alexander Hutton, and Gisela Mettele and the anonymous reviewers of the journal, for their incisive suggestions for improvements; and the Arts and Humanities Research Council, who funded ‘The Redress of the Past: Historical Pageants in Britain’ (award number AH/K003887/1), from which this article is based.

<sup>2</sup> For the Edwardian outburst of historical pageantry, see Ayako Yoshino, *Pageant Fever: Local History and Consumerism in Edwardian England*, Tokyo 2011; Deborah Sugg Ryan, “Pageantitis”: Frank Lascelles’ 1907 Oxford Historical Pageant, Visual Spectacle and Popular Memory, in: *Visual Culture in Britain*, 8:2, 2007, pp. 63-82; and Mark Freeman, “Splendid Display; Pompous Spectacle”: Historical Pageants in Twentieth-Century Britain, in: *Social History*, Vol. 38/2013, pp. 423-455.

<sup>3</sup> ‘The Redress of the Past’ project is compiling a unique database of historical pageantry in Britain. See <https://www.historicalpageants.ac.uk>. See the entry Pageant of London (1911).

<sup>4</sup> Such antecedents and influences included medieval mystery plays (such as those in York or Lincoln), Shakespeare, the Lord Mayor’s Show (London), the contemporary vogue for *tableaux vivant*, and the passion play of Oberammergau (Germany). For more discussion of the difficulty in defining historical pageantry, see Angela Bartie/Linda Fleming/Mark Freeman/Tom Hulme/Paul Readman, *Commemoration through dramatic performance: historical pageants and the age of anniversaries, 1905–1920*, in: Thomas Otte (ed.), *The Age of Anniversaries: The Cult of Commemoration 1905–1920* (forthcoming).

<sup>5</sup> For Sherborne and Parker’s influences, see Cecil P. Goodden, *The Story of the Sherborne Pageant*, Sherborne 1906; Michael Dobson, *Shakespeare and Amateur Performance: A Cultural History*, Cambridge 2011, pp. 168-169; and Robert Withington, *English Pageantry: An Historical Outline*, Cambridge 1920.

new “pageant masters”, such as the Shakespearean actor-manager Frank Benson, the actor and playwright George Hawtrey, and the artist and actor Frank Lascelles, as “pageant fever” infected Britain, her Empire, and beyond.<sup>6</sup>

In the 1920s and 1930s, pageantry was especially popular in the urban heartlands of Britain. Before 1914, only two major cities in England had staged a historical pageant, and there are examples of urban pageants failing to take off due to a lack of local interest – particularly from the urban working-classes.<sup>7</sup> By 1939, however, the picture was strikingly different; 14 of the 20 biggest cities had staged at least one pageant, Northern and Midlands manufacturing cities had emerged as pageantry’s new and appreciative home, and huge casts of 10,000 were regularly raised with ease in the name of civic history. Accompanying this shift to cities was the rise of a new breed of pageant master and producer, particularly inspired or influenced by Lascelles, and straddling the worlds of theatre, government and business. Pageants, from their earliest days, had a commercial motive, as small historic towns tried to stimulate a growing market for tourism. But interwar coalitions of city councils and industrialists took this to a new level, using historical pageantry to encourage the local economy in a time of economic Depression. This tactic arguably emerged from the nascent “civic publicity” movement, which originated in wartime government propaganda, but was catalysed especially by the 1924 British Empire Exhibition in London. Municipally-led “Civic Weeks” held at the Exhibition then spread across the industrial heartlands of Britain, and joined popular entertainment with economic boosterism – of which pageants became an important element.<sup>8</sup> In this article I expand more specifically on the historical themes and ethos that were portrayed in the episodes of urban pageants in the late 1920s and 1930s. In doing so, I argue that the vogue for the performance of the past can tell us much about a complex and often contradictory topic: the place of Neo-Romanticism, and its relationship to modernity, in mid-twentieth century urban Britain.

## **The City: From Romanticism to Neo-Romanticism**

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<sup>6</sup> For pageants outside of Britain, see David Glassberg, *American Historical Pageantry: The Uses of Tradition in the Early Twentieth Century*, London 1990; H.V. Nelles, *The Art of Nation-Building: Pageantry and Spectacle at Quebec’s Tercentenary*, Toronto 1999; and Joan Fitzpatrick Dean, *All Dressed Up: Modern Irish Historical Pageantry*, Syracuse, NY, 2014.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, the failure of the Nottingham Pageant to get-off-the-ground in 1908 – seemingly a victim of apathy from the ‘workers’ rather than the ‘gentlemen’, who had committed the guarantee money needed; see District Intelligence, in: *Grantham Journal* (23 November 1907), p. 3.

<sup>8</sup> For more discussion of this shift to cities, see Tom Hulme, “A nation of town criers”: civic publicity and historical pageantry in interwar Britain, in: *Urban History* (24 February 2016), see: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0963926816000262> (accessed 20 Sept 2016).

Romanticism, when it emerged as an artistic, literary, and intellectual movement in the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century, was primarily rooted in commitments to nature, natural life, and the medieval past – arguably a reaction to rapid industrialisation and accompanying urbanisation, as well as scientific rationalisation and the Enlightenment.<sup>9</sup> But Romanticism also shaped the experience of the burgeoning modern city to which it could seem to be diametrically opposed. The city, in turn, set the stage for many of Romanticism's achievements in literature and culture. Romanticism was, therefore, “[n]ot a movement against the city”, but “an aesthetic that developed along with – and contributed to – the ascendancy of metropolitan life.”<sup>10</sup> A key concern of Romantic thinking was thus the mutual interdependence of the individual with society, and the search for solutions to the individual's alienation from, and in, the city. William Wordsworth, for example, was not just the “Poet of Nature” and extoller of the supposedly untainted Lake District, but also an “avid metropolitan” who could find stimulation and beauty in London. William Blake, meanwhile, perhaps more obviously a ‘city poet’, could see the urban as “a node, a fissure, through which the true nature of society can be glimpsed” – which included “a vision of the new, renovated millennial city of the New Jerusalem [...] established through a ‘mental fight’ in the minds of ‘England's green & pleasant Land.’”<sup>11</sup> Transcendental Romantic art, shaped through collaborative networks of often city-based or visiting artists, actualized the urban and rural tension, but, at the same time, could also function as a site and symbol of inclusion, in a moment of rapid social change, by envisaging an ‘ideal’ city.<sup>12</sup>

Urbanisation continued unabated in the nineteenth century and, at the turn of the twentieth century especially, was accompanied by debates about the effects of the city on the life, morality, and health of its inhabitants. As Britain's ability to compete in an age of global economic and military competition came under increasing scrutiny, these debates grew in

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<sup>9</sup> See Joanne Schneider, *The Age of Romanticism*, London 2007, pp. 71-73.

<sup>10</sup> James Chandler/Kevin Gilmartin, Introduction: Engaging the Eidometropolis, in: James Chandler/Kevin Gilmartin (eds), *Romantic Metropolis: The Urban Scene of British Culture, 1780–1840*, Cambridge 2005, pp. 1 and 19.

<sup>11</sup> Eugene Stelzig, Wordsworth's Invigorating Hell: London in Book 7 of *The Prelude* (1805), in: Larry H. Peer (ed.), *Romanticism and the City*, Basingstoke 2011, pp. 181-196; Andrew Winckle, William Blake and the Urban Landscape of Apocalypse, conference paper on the International Conference on Romanticism, New York, NY, November 6, 2009 see: <https://18thcenturyculture.wordpress.com/conference-papers/william-blake-and-the-urban-landscape-of-apocalypse/> (accessed 28 September 2016); see also Mark Lussier, Blake's Golgotha: London and/as the Eternal City of Art, in: Peer, *Romanticism and the City*, pp. 197-207. For the classic work on the city-country tension, see Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City*, Oxford 1975.

<sup>12</sup> See Larry H Peer, Introduction: the Infernal and Celestial City of Romanticism, in: Peer, *Romanticism and the City*, pp. 1-8, here pp. 2-3. For the network of Romantic artists, see Daisy Hay, *Young Romantics: The Shelleys, Byron and Other Tangled Lives*, London 2011.

intensity.<sup>13</sup> In the ensuing intense search for an ideal society, where ideal ‘citizens’ could live healthy, happy and co-operative lifestyles, both anti-urban ‘Neo-Romantic’ artists and social reformers looked again to the landscape. Not just a muse for art and literature, the countryside was both a fruitful source of a useable identity, based on idealistic notions of ‘Englishness’, and a recuperative environment, which fostered health and community.<sup>14</sup> For the proponents of rural preservation, or the advocates of increasingly popular leisure ‘rambling’, the ‘degenerative’ city was thus in tension with the romantic countryside.<sup>15</sup> Accordingly, there were “loud and influential” calls for a reversal of urbanization, and a concurrent revival of traditional rural communities, led by organisations such as the National Trust (formed 1897) and the Council for the Preservation of Rural England (formed 1926), and campaigners such as the architect Clough Williams-Ellis.<sup>16</sup> A significant part of the logic of Neo-Romanticism, then, was its turn towards ‘home’ and history, as artists and writers – in reaction to the revolutionary and anti-historicist artistic manifestos of modernist groups like the Futurists – wondered how to “reconnect with the heavily abandoned past.”<sup>17</sup>

But, as with the original Romantics, the relationship between Neo-Romanticism, modernity, and urban life could also be a complex one. The city, of course, did not disappear in the twentieth century – neither in reality nor in representation – and an anti-urban and anti-modern notion of ‘Englishness’ was not embraced by all.<sup>18</sup> Rural preservationists, too, were not always exclusively motivated by anti-modernism.<sup>19</sup> Both Neo-Romantics and vociferous urban critics, and individuals that belonged to both categories, could accept that they were inescapably living in an urban-industrial age; pragmatists realised that simply “dispersing urban life” to idealistic rural communities was not feasible.<sup>20</sup> Alternatives included, respectively, the construction of new sorts of cities, and cities that were changed from within.

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<sup>13</sup> See Geoffrey R. Searle, *The Quest for National Efficiency: A Study in British Politics and Political Thought, 1899–1914*, Oxford 1971; David Peters Corbett/Ysanne Holt/Fiona Russell, Introduction, in: *The Geographies of Englishness: Landscape and the National Past 1880–1940*, New Haven 2002, pp. ix–xix.

<sup>14</sup> See F. Trentmann, *Civilization and its Discontents: English Neo-Romanticism and the Transformation of Anti-Modernism in Twentieth-Century Western Culture*, in: *Journal of Contemporary History*, 29:4, 1994, pp. 583–625; Paul Ward, *Britishness since 1870*, London 2004, p. 55; Corbett et al, Introduction; Ben Anderson, *A liberal countryside? The Manchester Ramblers' Federation and the “social readjustment” of urban citizens, 1929–1936*, in: *Urban History*, 38:1, 2011, pp. 84–102.

<sup>15</sup> Martin J. Wiener has been particularly influential in cementing the notion that the countryside was the place in which the British looked for their values; see Martin J. Wiener, *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit, 1850–1980*, Cambridge 1981.

<sup>16</sup> Alexandra Harris, *Romantic Moderns: English Writers, Artists and the Imagination from Virginia Woolf to Jon Piper*, London 2010, p. 169.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>18</sup> Peter Mandler, especially, has made a convincing case for challenging the assumptions of Wiener’s thesis; see Peter Mandler, *Against ‘Englishness’: English Culture and the Limits to Rural Nostalgia, 1850–1940*, in: *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, Vol. 7/1997, pp. 155–175.

<sup>19</sup> See David Matless, *Landscape and Englishness*, London 1998.

<sup>20</sup> Ward, *Britishness*, p. 60.

In the former category could be included Ebenezer Howard's turn-of-the-century "Garden City" model, which attempted to reconcile the benefits of country and city in a new synthesis – a model that informed town planning discourse for over half a century; or, in a similar vein, William Morris's vision, in his utopian novel *News from Nowhere* (1893), of a socialist society where London and other big centres of manufacture had disappeared, replaced by smaller, better-built and more cohesive urban settlements where inhabitants were released, rather than enslaved, through the beneficent use of mechanization.<sup>21</sup> In the latter category, instead, we could see the 1930s demolition of inner-city slums and concurrent enthusiasm for 'cottage-style' social housing; or, as will be argued here, the staging of popular and participatory theatre that sought to locate present-day cities in their pre-industrial and rural history, thus providing a sense of belonging and continuity at a time of change and dislocation. Indeed, targeted at urban and suburban audiences, the emotive power of the interwar "conjured village of the mind's eye" was harnessed at a time when the values and traditions of the country were arguably being lost.<sup>22</sup> Rural and landscape ideals of Englishness, then, despite often being conceived as anti-industrial and anti-modern, were, in fact, "mediated through metropolitan ideals" – and often for urban purposes.<sup>23</sup>

### **Historical Pageantry and Adaptive Modernity**

Historiographical debates about the contradictions and complexities of the relationship between modernity and Neo-Romanticism have been reflected, if only implicitly, in the growing historiography of historical pageantry. This is unsurprising, given both the centrality of particular notions of the past to the episodes portrayed, and the movement's origins in small towns that often felt left behind by modernity. Performances of a utopian, pre-industrial, and 'Merry England' past could indeed be seen as a conservative reaction to change. Louis Napoleon Parker, the inventor of modern pageantry, moved in early Neo-Romanticist circles, particularly around the folk revival, and was open about his hope that the "community bonanza" of pageantry would both relieve class tensions, and kill-off "the modernising spirit" which was destroying "all loveliness and has no loveliness of its own to put in its place", and signalled the "negation of poetry [and] romance."<sup>24</sup> Into the interwar period, as Alexander Hutton has shown,

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<sup>21</sup> See Stephen V. Ward, *The Garden City introduced*, and Frederick H.A. Aalen, *English origins*, in: Stephen V. Ward (ed), *The Garden City: Past, Present and Future*, London 1992, pp. 1-27 and pp. 28-51; William Morris, *News from Nowhere*, Cambridge 1890.

<sup>22</sup> Harris, *Romantic Moderns*, p. 174.

<sup>23</sup> Corbett et al, *Introduction*, p. xi. The use of medieval motifs in the advertising of the London Underground is one interesting example of this. See Michael T. Saler, *The Avant-Garde in Interwar England: Medieval Modernism and the London Underground*, Oxford 1999.

<sup>24</sup> Louis N. Parker, *Historical Pageants*, in: *Journal of the Society of Arts* (22 December 1905), pp. 142-143. Parker's comments also reflected a wider viewpoint from those interested in the past and in folk culture –

pageantry could certainly be “an ideal bedfellow to expressions of rural nostalgia and the projections of a bucolic ‘deep’ England” – expressed particularly in the pageants of villages and towns that feared “ribbon development” and the ever-encroaching growth of London, famously lamented in rural preservationist tracts such as Williams-Ellis’s *England and the Octopus* (1928).<sup>25</sup> David Glassberg, similarly, has seen the Parkerian tradition as being a protest against modernity through “historical imagery in a format that glorified a remote golden handicraft past.”<sup>26</sup> But though Parker may have originated the format, his form of pageantry was only the beginning rather than the end of the movement, and it underwent several divergent evolutions – almost as soon as it had been ‘invented’ – which complicate a simplistic conservative/modern binary.

Deborah Sugg Ryan, for example, has usefully shown how the actor and director Frank Lascelles, who was staging huge and popular pageants from 1907, developed his own distinctive style of visual spectacular. Unlike Parker, Lascelles prioritised the dramatic movement of large groups of people in colourful dances and processions rather than spoken dialogue, and arguably “embraced modernity” instead of rejecting it.<sup>27</sup> His pageants, Ryan posits, should be seen in the context of other contemporary mass events that depended on the visual spectacle of thousands of people gathered in one space – such as the spectacle plays of Max Reinhardt, “toga plays”, huge exhibitions, and the cinema epics of D.W. Griffith and Cecil B. De Mille.<sup>28</sup> Also in contrast to Parker, who had a tendency to downplay the importance of scenery – arguing that more often than not it was a distraction – Lascelles also encouraged the creation of whole historical landscapes, informed by his practice as a painter, his interest in the Romanticist-inflected Pre-Raphaelites, and his enthusiasm for the Arts and Crafts movement.<sup>29</sup> From a somewhat different perspective, Joshua Esty has shown how, in the 1930s, authors associated with English late-modernism, such as Virginia Woolf, E.M. Forster and T.S. Eliot, actually found the pageant-play format a method that they could use to compose ‘valedictions’ to modernist modes of thought. In the performance of the past, they

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Hubert Parry’s inaugural address to the Folk-Song Society shared much in common with the language used by Parker, see Hubert Parry, Inaugural address, in: *Journal of the Folk-Song Society*, 1:1, 1899, pp. 1-3.

<sup>25</sup> See Alexander Hutton’s entries on pageants in Selborne (1926 and 1938), Abinger (1934), Ashdown (1929) and Chittlehampton (1936) in the database on <http://www.historicalpageants.ac.uk>. Somewhat ironically, as Hutton points out, villages and towns staging these pageants that idealised the rural in opposition to London often depended on metropolitan authors, and spectating visitors, enabled by the development of comprehensive modern rail and road networks.

<sup>26</sup> Glassberg contrasts this with the American style of pageantry, which he sees as being much more future orientated, see Glassberg, *American Historical Pageantry*, pp. 149-150. H.V. Nelles, writing about Canadian pageantry, made much the same point; see Nelles, *The Art of Nation-Building: Pageantry and Spectacle at Quebec’s Tercentenary*, Toronto 1999, p. 144.

<sup>27</sup> Ryan, “Pageantitis”, pp. 68-69.

<sup>28</sup> Deborah S. Ryan, *Staging the imperial city: the Pageant of London, 1911*, in: Felix Driver/David Gilbert (eds), *Imperial Cities*, Manchester 1999, p. 118.

<sup>29</sup> Ryan, *Staging the imperial city*, p. 120.

believed, was a positive “spontaneous folk authenticity” and “acceptable” version “of national art” that responded to their increasing sense of cultural isolation.<sup>30</sup> New political organisations, too, from the internationalist League of Nations Union to the Women’s Institute, were able to adapt the basic elements of pageantry to promote what were progressive and forward-looking movements wholly suited to contemporary questions of society and change.<sup>31</sup>

Historical pageantry as a form, then, can arguably be better defined by its sheer adaptability and malleability than by any inherent notion of conservatism. In Britain’s industrial cities during the great Depression pageantry could accordingly be used to stimulate the local economy and, more importantly for the argument put forward here, provide a rooted sense of continuity, stability, and future prosperity.<sup>32</sup> To achieve this, pageant masters of the interwar period constructed their performance through what we might define as a Neo-Romantic perspective. In doing so, they attempted to overcome potential contradictions or tensions between the reality of the modern urban life, and the pre-modern historical past(s) that their pageants celebrated. As Kitty Hauser has shown in a study of photography from the 1920s to 1950s, “Neo-Romanticism may be thought of as a way of seeing as well as a style”, with “Neo-Romantic viewers as well as Neo-Romantic artists”. By this Hauser means the ways in which contemporaries could identify the Romantic symbolic importance of the depiction of topics such as local scenes, nature and landscape in a variety of media forms. Hauser further usefully delineates what could be seen as the two prevalent – and oppositional – discourses of Neo-Romanticism: a strictly “preservationist” mind-set, and a more reflexive “archaeological imagination”. In the former, modernity is an “irremovable barrier in the way of aesthetic pleasure”; in the latter, modernity is “a barrier that can be seen through, over, or round”: the past may have lost visibility in the modern landscape, but it was not “sensuously unrecoverable”. The past could, consequently, operate as a “consoling sensibility” in the present. Modernity, by the same token, could be reconciled with an increasingly impossible ideal historical landscape or culture if the essential destructibility of history and historical culture was believed, or – ideally – portrayed. It was this function of historical pageantry, its “archaeological imagination”, which enabled or allowed pageant masters to stage historical spectacles that both looked backwards and forwards in a way that Neo-Romantic viewers may have recognised. As Hauser points out, modernity did not remove the historicity of a

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<sup>30</sup> Joshua D. Esty, *Amnesia in the fields: late modernism, late imperialism, and the English pageant-play*, in: *ELH*, 69:1, 2002, p. 250.

<sup>31</sup> See Mick Wallis, *Pageantry and the Popular Front: Ideological Production in the “Thirties”*, in: *New Theatre Quarterly*, Vol. 10/1994, pp. 132-156; Helen McCarthy, *The League of Nations, Public Ritual and National Identity in Britain c.1919–56*, in: *History Workshop Journal*, Vol. 70/2010, pp. 108-132.

<sup>32</sup> Hulme, “A Nation of Town Criers”.



place; it was simply the latest stage in that place's history.<sup>33</sup> Historical pageantry, I would argue, was a visual representation of this reality.

Indeed, as Paul Readman and others have shown, the interest in the past signified by the outburst of historical pageantry went far beyond a wish to actually *return* to a pre-industrial society. On the contrary, the past provided inspiration for a new future, positively accommodating rapid and frightening change and progress alongside the preservation of historic landscapes, customs and culture.<sup>34</sup> Mick Wallis, for example, has demonstrated how historical pageantry in village settings was seen as having the potential to create a new rural community through a recourse to the life and history of the common labourer, rather than the landed gentry. The interwar village pageant master Mary Kelly, "unlike many of her more nostalgic contemporaries", still "recognized the class conflicts and history of deprivation of the rural poor, and blended such elements into the pageants she devised."<sup>35</sup> At a time when the idealised-by-some countryside did not tally with the impression from others of continuing economic and moral rural malaise, Kelly's pageants arguably bridged this gap.<sup>36</sup> For the great urban pageants of the late 1920s and 1930s, however, the evocation of the rural and pre-industrial worked in several other ways. By this point, Louis Napoleon Parker had all-but stopped producing historical pageants. In his 1928 autobiography he complained that a whole host of unworthy imitators had sprung up and commercialised his invention, with only one "honourable exception": the pageant master Charles Hawtrey, who had died in 1910 after staging only three pageants.<sup>37</sup> Other new and ambitious pageant masters were still connected to Parker's ethos in many respects, but they arguably had more in common – personally and professionally – with Lascelles, who was responsible for many of the hugely successful pageants in the cities of the Midlands and the North until his death in 1934.<sup>38</sup>

## Urban Pageants and the Romantic Past

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<sup>33</sup> Kitty Hauser, *Shadow Sites: Photography, Archaeology, and the British Landscape*, Oxford 2007, pp. 11, 4, 281, and 5.

<sup>34</sup> Paul Readman, *The place of the past in English culture c.1890–1914*, in: *Past and Present*, 186:1, 2005, p. 191; Bartie et al, *Commemoration through dramatic performance*.

<sup>35</sup> Mick Wallis, *Unlocking the Secret Soul: Mary Kelly, Pioneer of Village Theatre*, in: *New Theatre Quarterly*, 16:4, 2000, p. 348.

<sup>36</sup> It is worth noting that an entirely negative interpretation of interwar agriculture and rural life has been challenged recently, with historians emphasising regeneration as well as decline. See Paul Brassey/Jeremy Burchardt/Lynne Thompson (eds), *The English Countryside between the Wars: Regeneration or Decline*, Woodbridge 2006.

<sup>37</sup> Louis Napoleon Parker, *Several of My Lives*, London 1928, pp. 297-298.

<sup>38</sup> For Matthew Anderson and Lascelles, see Hulme, "A nation of town criers"; for Lascelles and Lally, see Ryan, "Pageantitis" and Deborah Sugg Ryan, Lally, Gwen (1882–1963), in: *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford, Sept 2013 <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/59378> (accessed 19 Aug 2016).

For industrial places, dependent on trade and thus suffering hard times, the romantic pre-industrial past needed to serve as a reassurance that the city could survive – and indeed prosper – through current dislocation. Firstly, and in tune with pre-1914 pageants, historical events in the pre-modern civic life were celebrated – not because authors and enactors wished to return to the period in which they flourished, but because they enabled the construction of a genealogical lineage to contemporary civic institutions, and the power that they now wielded. What may have seemed unique or atemporal was portrayed instead as the ongoing results of a process that had begun many centuries before. Pageants in cities were thus often staged to commemorate their past incorporation, with episodes demonstrating the romantic historical roots of government and urban growth. The massive Pageant of Manchester in 1938, part of the city's centenary celebrations, which had 10,000 performers and seen by perhaps as many as 100,000 people, offers one example. It was directed by the pageant master and creator of the Norwich Maddermarket Theatre, Nugent Monck, who claimed to have developed his style without influence from Parker. Assisting Monck was Edward Baring, a businessman and pageant producer with 30 years of experience, who, in the 1920s and 1930s, had formed something of a double-act with Lascelles. Episodes in Manchester's Pageant included the founding of a Roman fort at 'Mancunium' in 79 AD; King Edward including 'Mameceaster' in his dominions in 924 AD; and Manchester receiving its first charter from Thomas Gresley in 1301.<sup>39</sup> In an era of central state growth, and with fears of a declining societal interest in municipal matters, the reminder of medieval triumphal town charters from the past encouraged local people to think of their government as a body with both a long and noble history – the contemporary municipal council being its result.<sup>40</sup> Choosing episodes from the medieval period that demonstrated Manchester's importance and autonomy reflected the continuing romantic power of what David Matthews has dubbed the "civic Middle Ages" – despite his contention that this aspect of British culture had declined in the early twentieth century.<sup>41</sup>

For towns in counties such as Middlesex and Essex, located on the borders of London, 'inventing' a history of governmental autonomy was particularly attractive. After the expansion tendencies of the London County Council became clear in the early 1920s, these towns increasingly petitioned for new charters of municipal incorporation in order to stave off the ever-encroaching capital. The Barking Pageant of 1931, for example, was staged to celebrate the granting of a municipal borough charter of incorporation that year. Directed by Lascelles,

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<sup>39</sup> See the entry for Manchester (1938) in the database on <http://www.historicalpageants.ac.uk>.

<sup>40</sup> For these aspects of pageantry in relation to small towns in Britain in particular, see Angela Bartie/Linda Fleming/Mark Freeman/Tom Hulme/Paul Readman, *Performing the Past: Identity, Civic Culture and Historical Pageants in Twentieth-Century Small Towns*, in: Luda Klusakova (ed.), *Small Towns in Europe and Beyond: 20th–21st Century* (forthcoming).

<sup>41</sup> David Matthews, *Medievalism: A Critical History*, Woodbridge 2015, p. 30.

with a relatively small cast of 2000, the pageant included many episodes that featured Barking's glorious past – from its Abbey to a visit from King Charles I, and finally the Great Barking Fair of 1746 (Figure I) – patronised by the Lord Mayor of London and other notables, such as Captain Cook. But its epilogue consisted of all the historic performers of the pageant marching past, to be finally joined by municipal representatives of the new Borough, as Long Live Barking was cried out.<sup>42</sup> This was an obvious attempt to connect the great deeds and men of the past with the successful corporation and councillors of the present.

**Figure I: Postcard of the Pageant of Barking (1931), reproduced by kind permission of the Ellie Reid Collection**



Parker would perhaps have recognised and approved of this continued emphasis on the origins and autonomy of local civic institutions. But there were also developments of which he would have been less appreciative. Pageants, in the interwar period, became much more comfortable with portraying the industrial past and present – and highlighting (implicitly and sometimes explicitly) the connection between the two. Lascelles's Bradford Pageant of 1931, for example, which had 7500 performers and was seen by around 120,000 people, was organised by the city's elites to provide a sense of stability and prosperity at a time of great economic depression. After a narrative that started in Roman times, and went through the Normans, Plantagenets, and Stuarts, the final episode featured "Bradford of the Industrial Revolution". Scenes here depicted the development of woollen production in the late

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<sup>42</sup> See the entries for Barking (1931), Harrow (1923), and Dartford (1932) in the database on <http://www.historicalpageants.ac.uk>.

eighteenth and nineteenth century, and a triumphant election of the town's first Members of Parliament after the 1832 Great Reform Act (Figure II).<sup>43</sup> In doing so, the organisers hoped to rally a fractious local society around the city and its governors. Birmingham's centenary pageant of 1938, which had a cast of 8000 and was seen by almost 140,000 people, offers an even more striking example. The second episode concentrated on the granting of a "Market Charter" by the King, alongside the buoyant market itself, in 1250. The final scene also returned to the economy of the city, but by portraying "Birmingham Today", with representations of the important trades of the city – such as electrical trades, firearms, and motor vehicles.<sup>44</sup> It was directed by Gwen Lally, an increasingly important pageant master in the 1930s. She was connected strongly to Frank Lascelles; as an actress under the management of Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree (also a mentor of Lascelles), she had performed in Lascelles's Oxford Pageant (1907), and took on board his preference for minimal dialogue and maximum spectacle.<sup>45</sup> These big-city pageants were often accompanied by exhibitions of contemporary industrial products. Parker, who usually ended the episodic narrative before the eighteenth century in order to avoid contemporary political tensions and modern aspects of industrialisation and urbanisation, and did not approve of pageant commercialisation, would likely not have been impressed.

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<sup>43</sup> See the entries for Bradford (1931) in the database on <http://www.historicalpageants.ac.uk>.

<sup>44</sup> See the entry for Birmingham (1938) in the database on <http://www.historicalpageants.ac.uk>.

<sup>45</sup> Ellie Reid, Gwen Lally: a Pageant Master in the making (13<sup>th</sup> August 2014) at <http://historicalpageants.ac.uk/blog/pageanteers-archives-1-gwen-lally/> (accessed 20 Sept 2016).

**Figure II: Image from Historical Pageant of Bradford: Souvenir Programme (Bradford, 1931), reproduced by kind permission of the Ellie Reid Collection**



Evocations of historical continuity could also go beyond the city's institutions and industries. Parker had been keen for his pageanteers to take a historical role that reflected their current position in society – a current Mayor playing a Mayor of the past, a vicar or priest playing a monk, an agricultural labourer playing a medieval peasant, and so forth. Parker's pageants did, then, give attention to all sections of local society. But the focus was, for the most part, on what he saw as the most important historical actors – Kings, Queens, Archbishops and the like – and on cementing social hierarchies rather than challenging them.<sup>46</sup> In the interwar period, however, it became much more common to celebrate the life of the common folk; they were given increased visibility, more speaking roles, and were depicted as having a key importance in the unfolding of local life. Thus, in a Lancashire pageant staged by Matthew Anderson, a civic publicity 'expert' and theatre-producer, barely a real historical figure was portrayed. Instead, around 12,000 performers enacted scenes that concentrated on the lives of normal contemporary working people, such as a "Market Day", "Lancashire at Work", and

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<sup>46</sup> Wallis, *The Popular Front Pageant*. This aspect certainly continued in some interwar pageants – such as in Taunton; see Michael Woods, *Performing Power: local politics and the Taunton Pageant of 1928*, in: *Journal of Historical Geography*, 25:1, 1999, pp. 57-74.

“Lancashire at Play” – which focused on the seaside, with donkeys, ventriloquists, knitting mothers, children making sandcastles, and more – to a total audience of around 200,000 people.<sup>47</sup>

According to Nugent Monck, the “central theme of modern pageantry” in the 1930s was thus the increased importance given to the growth of the “influence of the crowd in municipal government”:

“[From] law and order by the Romans, through the breaking of the Feudal Barons, the establishment of the Constitution, and so gradually to universal suffrage and state ownership, it is the increasing power of the man in the street to organize his life [...] and it is these men and women who become the principal performers in pageants.”<sup>48</sup>

F.E. Doran, a local theatre producer, clergyman, and pageant master, made similar points to Monck. His Manchester pageant in 1926, seen by around 100,000 people, aimed to “symbolise the growing power of the people through the centuries, to indicate the part played by Manchester people in moulding the thought, institutions and commerce of the country, to emphasise that beyond the veil of smoke and the forest of chimneys our civic life is based on heroic and romantic incidents, the endeavours and struggles of the common people.”<sup>49</sup>

Historical pageants in the interwar years, in summary, reflected several trends. In a basic sense, scenes of pre-urban life reflected an increased tendency from the late-nineteenth century to identify the peasantry as “the nostalgic embodiment of noble, Anglo-Saxon virtues and an exemplary figure in an authentic and stable golden age entirely unaffected by change.”<sup>50</sup> But interwar pageants also reflected a more recent growth of interest in histories of ‘everyday life’, propagated by social historians such as the Quennells and institutions such as the British Broadcasting Corporation.<sup>51</sup> Romanticising the role of the common man in the past was about creating an affinity between the urban-industrial worker in the present, and their romantic rural forebears in the past, as well as projecting such values forward in time. Monck’s mentioning of suffrage and signalling of the role of women, in addition, is instructive. By the interwar years, and in contrast to the pre-1914 period, women had a much higher visibility in the organisational structure of pageantry committees, and also increasingly made up a larger proportion of the cast, as pageant producers sometimes struggled to recruit male volunteers. Both individual women, and the organisations they founded in these decades, saw the

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<sup>47</sup> See the entry for Lancashire (1932) in the database on <http://www.historicalpageants.ac.uk>.

<sup>48</sup> W. Nugent Monck, English Fond of Pageantry, in: Portsmouth Evening News (7 June 1938), p. 6.

<sup>49</sup> F.E. Doran, Producer’s preface, in: Historical Pageant of Manchester, Manchester 1926, p. 4.

<sup>50</sup> Corbett et al, Introduction, p. xiii.

<sup>51</sup> See Laura Carter, The Quennells and the “history of everyday life” in England c.1918–69, in: History Workshop Journal, 81:1, 2016, pp. 106-134.

pageantry format as one way to fit themselves into a non-contentious role of active citizenship following suffrage extension in 1918 and 1928.<sup>52</sup> As one local newspaper in 1929 put it, pageants were “probably the ideal form of dramatic expression for Women’s Institutes”, since both sought to “bring a wider culture and a comradeship to the countryside”, as well as providing a chance for women to develop their practical skills in the making of costumes and properties, and an opportunity to express team-work. Organising a pageant was thus “the dramatization of the Institute ideals.”<sup>53</sup> At the same time, pageants in both rural and urban locations could draw attention to the domestic lives of women; the parts they had played in past conflict and politics; and could even signal contemporary women’s associational opposition to varied issues – such as hunting or war.<sup>54</sup>

Romanticising the common people was also an exercise in trying to demonstrate a less elitist sense of society in the context of the mass participation and sacrifice of the First World War, coalescing with hopes and fears about democracy following political enfranchisement (1918 and 1928), and the supposed susceptibility of the working-classes to political radicalism in the context of continental fascism and communism.<sup>55</sup> In an often class-torn society, the authors and organisers of historical pageants tended to emphasize common history and achievements, while smoothing over antagonistic debates and interests. Not all performers or spectators, it should be said, were either fooled or even necessarily interested in this narrative. Pageant masters could face challenges from organisations such as the Communist Party if it was felt they had occluded urban working-class history or revolt.<sup>56</sup> Much debate took place during the 1938 Manchester Pageant, for example, over the omission of Peterloo from the narrative – with the Communist Party eventually staging their own alternative pageant that celebrated the labour movement’s role in the life of the city (Figure III). Similarly, at Bradford in 1931, there was a great conflict over the depicting of the Luddites, and the contentions from the local Communist Party that the pageant attempted to subvert the goal of

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<sup>52</sup> See Caitriona Beaumont, Citizens not feminists: the boundary negotiated between citizenship and feminism by mainstream women’s organisations in England, 1928–39, in: *Women’s History Review*, Vol. 9/2000, pp. 411–429.

<sup>53</sup> Pageant of Dorset History, *The Bridport News* (26 July 1929), p. 4.

<sup>54</sup> See, for example, the entry for Dorset (1929) and Dorset (1939) in the database on <http://www.historicalpageants.ac.uk>.

<sup>55</sup> The Association for Education in Citizenship, for example, was formed by the politician, industrialist, and philanthropist E.D. Simon due to his belief that the young needed to be guided away from the temptations of fascism; see Guy Whitmarsh, *The Politics of Political Education: An Episode*, in: *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 6:2, 1974, pp. 133–142. It is also noteworthy that many pageants depicted the First World War in this period, and from an angle that commended the bravery and sacrifice of both soldiers and mourners. See Angela Bartie/Linda Fleming/Mark Freeman/Tom Hulme/Paul Readman, “And those who live, how shall I tell their fame?” Historical pageants, collective remembrance and the First World War, 1919–1939, *Historical Research*, forthcoming 2016.

<sup>56</sup> See the entry for Manchester (1938) and Bradford (1931) in the database on <http://www.historicalpageants.ac.uk>.



workers' rights. We must also acknowledge the multiplicity of responses pageants could engender in spectators and performers – from fun and adventure to subverting the message for their own ends. Crowds could misinterpret serious scenes for humorous ones; use the gathering of masses of people for social or criminal behaviour; or, quite simply, enjoy the spectacle rather than the educational ethos.<sup>57</sup>

**Figure III: 'Manchester Communist Party Centenary Pageant and Sports Gala' (18<sup>th</sup> June 1938). Creative Commons Licence © The Working Class Movement Library**



David Mellor, when curating a 1987 exhibition on the Neo-Romantic imagination in Britain between 1935 and 1955, usefully opened out the definition of Neo-Romanticism from a narrow history of art to a wide range of media – such as photography, poetry, and films – making the point that there was a general Neo-Romantic sensibility throughout British culture.<sup>58</sup> Urban pageantry, as I hope I have shown here, could arguably be added to this list. Pageant masters, authors, and organisers may not have been Neo-Romantic in any strict or self-defining sense,

<sup>57</sup> For more on responses to pageants see Deborah S Ryan, *Staging the imperial city: the Pageant of London, 1911*, in: Felix Driver/David Gilbert (eds), *Imperial Cities*, Manchester 1999, pp. 128-130.

<sup>58</sup> See David Mellor (ed), *A Paradise Lost: the Neo-Romantic Imagination in Britain 1935–1955*, London 1987. Discussed in Hauser, *Shadow Sites*, pp. 10-11.



but they were dealing with and overcoming similar shifts in thought and artistic practice. Historical pageantry could achieve a balancing act by allowing a Neo-Romantic rural or conservative impulse to be expressed within the modern city, rather than only beyond its borders. This brings us to two conclusions. Firstly, that the performance or re-enactment of the past did not result solely from backward looking and anti-modern impulses. Just as placing the 'traditional' and 'the modern' as binaries in the interwar period has proven to be simplistic in a variety of other cases – from the cultural memory of the First World War to the branding of the London Underground – so it is apparent for historical pageantry.<sup>59</sup> Secondly, that the place of the city in interwar Neo-Romanticist currents of thought was a complex one, but not necessarily wholly negative or contradictory. Andrew Radford has rightly pointed out that both the definition and cultural legacies of Neo-Romanticism are “notoriously tricky to delimit, given the tangle of the movement’s theoretical strands and elusive periodization.”<sup>60</sup> Alan Powers, in a different vein, has pointed out the dangers of always associating certain motifs or symbols with a cultural tradition – such as landscape or countryside being always a “cipher for conservatism and nostalgia.”<sup>61</sup> By the same token, it is now worth pointing out that industrial cities in the 1930s were not always associated with the death of romantic ideas of the national or local past – despite the prevalence and power of the English countryside in the construction of ‘Englishness’.

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<sup>59</sup> See Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History*, Cambridge 1996, pp. 3-4.

<sup>60</sup> Andrew Radford, Mary Butts and British Neo-Romanticism, London 2014, p. xii.

<sup>61</sup> Alan Powers, *The reluctant romantics: Axis magazine 1935–37*, in: *The Geographies of Englishness: Landscape and the National Past 1880–1940*, New Haven 2002, p. 226.